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## THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S POLICIES ARE FUELING THE EXTINCTION CRISIS

A new U.N. report finds one million species face extinction. The Department of the Interior and the Fish and Wildlife Service are adding to the problem.

JIMMY TOBIAS · MAY 7, 2019

The Earth's life support systems are in precipitous decline, mass wildlife extinction is on the rise, and the very underpinnings of human society are in peril. That was the grave message hundreds of the world's leading scientists sent on Monday when they released the initial summary of a forthcoming 1,500-page report on the biodiversity crisis that threatens ecosystems across the globe.

Backed by the United Nations and more than 130 countries around the world, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services (IPBES) found in its shocking summary that "around 1 million species already face extinction, many within decades, unless action is taken to reduce the intensity of drivers of biodiversity loss."

This vast crisis, the assessment found, is being driven by logging, mining, overfishing, farming, invasive species, pollution, and other forms of land destruction, which have already "significantly altered" 75 percent of the Earth's land surface and destroyed 85 percent of the world's wetlands. Though caused in part by climate change, the biodiversity crisis is its own distinct problem and it poses an existential threat to human civilization.

"Biodiversity needs to be considered as an equally important issue as climate change," said Sir Robert Watson, the chair of IPBES, in a statement. "It is not just an environmental issue. It is an economic issue, a development issue, a security issue, a social, moral and ethical issue."

The collapse of Earth's ecosystems comes as America's institutions are failing to confront the extinction crisis—or, in some cases, actually making the problem worse.

Consider the country's foremost wildlife conservation agency and a crucial line of defense against mass extinction, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Under the Trump administration, the agency has increasingly abdicated its responsibility as the chief enforcer of the Endangered Species Act. At the present moment, top political officials at FWS and its parent agency, the Department of the Interior (DOI), are actively trying to weaken our most important anti-extinction law. Last summer, the DOI issued sweeping proposals that, if finalized, would undermine federal protections for threatened species and make it easier for the government to ignore the impacts of climate change on imperiled animals, among other changes.

Over the last two years, the DOI has also sought to roll back protections for a slew of imperiled species like the greater sage grouse, the American burying beetle, the gray wolf, and more. These rollbacks primarily benefit the administration's allies in the mining, oil and gas, and agriculture industries.

The administration, however, isn't just taking aim at individual laws or animals, but important scientific findings too. In April, for instance, the *New York Times* reported that Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt personally intervened to block the release of a Fish and Wildlife Service report that found that two widely used pesticides "jeopardize the continued existence" of more than 1,200 birds, fish, and other species around the country. The decision to block the report is seen as a boon to the pesticide industry, including corporate giants like Dow AgroSciences. And the Fish and Wildlife Service is cracking down on transparency as well—it issued a guidance last year that will make it harder for the public to obtain records about its decisions concerning endangered species.

The IPBES "study should trigger massive federal action to save wildlife, but folks at the White House are probably too busy meeting oil executives to even read it," says Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director at the Center for Biological Diversity, an anti-extinction group. "Even in the face of an extinction crisis that could burn through a million species, Trump seems intent on pouring more gasoline on the fire. His administration is kneecapping the Endangered Species Act and giving polluters free rein at the worst possible time, when our planet's wildlife is already headed for disaster."

As federal regulators flounder, the mainstream media is also failing us. Even compared to climate change, the world's other great environmental catastrophe, the mass extinction crisis gets little attention from prominent news outlets. A recent study in the journal *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* found that the mainstream press suffers from a serious "biodiversity communications deficit" in which it covers issues like endangered species and biodiversity loss far less frequently than it covers the topic of climate change.

"[Biodiversity] is covered up to eight times less by the media compared to climate change," the study's authors report, noting that "an international communications strategy is urgently required to raise public awareness on biodiversity issues."

"Our house is still burning," they add, "and we only have one eye on it."

The public on social media seems mostly oblivious too. On the day IPBES released its devastating findings on the biodiversity crisis, these were the top trends on Twitter: "Michael Cohen," "Prince Harry," "#RoyalBaby," "Westeros," "House Judiciary Committee," "#TrumpScaredofMueller," and "Starbucks Cup," the last topic a reference to a cup of coffee that was accidentally included in a scene in the most recent episode of *Game of Thrones*.

The world's ecosystems are collapsing. "We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide," Watson says. To solve the crisis, will require "transformative change" of the globe's social, economic, and technological systems. And yet America's most important institutions, from the press to the federal government, are asleep on their watch—or worse.